



The Duty of Lawyers to the Court Vs. Client Loyalty in India

Jyoti

B. Com, LLB, LLM, Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra, Haryana, India

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Abstract— *The legal profession in India is founded on a delicate balance between an advocate's duty to the court and loyalty to the client. This paper examines the ethical tensions arising from this dual responsibility within the Indian adversarial system. It analyses the statutory and regulatory framework governing legal ethics, including the Advocates Act, 1961, and the Bar Council of India Rules, alongside key judicial interpretations that emphasise advocates' role as officers of the court. The study identifies major challenges to ethical compliance, including adversarial pressures, the commercialisation of legal practice, and weak disciplinary enforcement. Comparative perspectives from common law jurisdictions further highlight the need to prioritise judicial integrity without undermining client representation. The paper argues that ethical advocacy requires principled balancing, supported by effective regulation, judicial oversight, and continuous professional education. It concludes that harmonising court duty and client loyalty is essential for maintaining public trust, safeguarding the administration of justice, and strengthening the ethical foundations of the Indian legal profession.*



Keywords— *Legal Profession, Fundamental Obligations, Ethical Dilemmas, Bar Council of India.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The legal profession plays a central role in the administration of justice. Lawyers are not only representatives of their clients but also important participants in the justice delivery system. In India, the advocate occupies a unique position as an officer of the court, expected to assist in the fair and effective functioning of the judiciary. This dual role creates an inherent tension between two fundamental obligations of legal practice: the duty of lawyers to the court and their duty of loyalty to the client. While client loyalty requires advocates to protect the interests of those they represent with dedication and confidentiality, the duty to the court demands honesty, fairness, and respect for the rule of law (Advocates Act, 1961).

In an adversarial legal system like India's, lawyers are often expected to present their client's case in the strongest possible manner. This expectation sometimes leads to ethical dilemmas, especially when client instructions conflict with legal truth, procedural fairness, or the broader

interests of justice. For example, situations may arise where a client wishes to suppress material facts, present misleading arguments, or delay proceedings for strategic advantage. In such circumstances, a lawyer must decide whether to prioritise client loyalty or adhere to their higher obligation towards the court and the justice system (Bar Council of India Rules, 1975).

The duty of lawyers to the court is rooted in the idea that advocacy is not merely a private service but a public function. Courts rely on lawyers to present facts accurately, cite law honestly, and refrain from conduct that may obstruct justice. The Supreme Court of India has repeatedly emphasised that advocates are officers of the court and must uphold the dignity and integrity of the judicial process (P.N. Duda v. P. Shiv Shanker, 1988). This duty includes avoiding false statements, discouraging frivolous litigation, and ensuring that legal processes are not abused. Therefore, loyalty to the client cannot extend to acts that undermine the administration of justice.

At the same time, client loyalty remains a cornerstone of the lawyer–client relationship. Trust, confidentiality, and zealous representation are essential for effective legal assistance. Clients disclose sensitive information to their lawyers with the expectation that their interests will be protected within the bounds of law. Any dilution of this trust may weaken access to justice and discourage individuals from seeking legal remedies. The challenge, therefore, lies not in choosing one duty over the other, but in striking a careful balance between the two (Menon, 2014).

In the Indian context, this balance is regulated through statutory provisions, professional conduct rules, and judicial pronouncements. However, rapid changes in the legal profession, increasing commercialisation, and intense competition have further complicated ethical compliance. As a result, conflicts between court duty and client loyalty are becoming more frequent and complex. Understanding this tension is crucial to maintaining public confidence in the legal system and to upholding ethical advocacy as the cornerstone of justice. This paper examines the nature of this conflict in India and explores how lawyers can harmonise their obligations to both the court and their clients within a constitutional and ethical framework.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Sankalpita (2020) presents a detailed overview of professional ethics in the Indian legal profession, emphasising that advocates are bound by codified standards to regulate behaviour towards the court and clients. This work explains the dual framework under the Advocates Act, 1961, and the Bar Council of India Rules, which impose duties such as maintaining confidentiality, providing fair representation, and conducting oneself with dignity in court. It highlights the conceptual basis for legal ethics and the fiduciary relationship between lawyers and clients while also stressing that lawyers must uphold the dignity of the judicial process in all professional conduct, thus implicitly recognising the tension between client advocacy and ethical duties to the court.

W Bradley Wendel (2020) explains that although not exclusive to India, comparative scholarship on lawyers' duties reflects a universal tension between client loyalty and institutional responsibilities. Such works argue that lawyers must balance zealous client advocacy with broader ethical imperatives, including integrity, honesty, and the rule of law. These principles—widely discussed in the international legal ethics literature—reinforce the idea that the duty to the court and the justice system cannot be subordinated to private interests, and they support an interpretation of professional ethics that seeks harmony

between competing obligations. This broader theoretical backdrop informs the Indian debate on ethical conflicts in legal practice.

Objectives

- i. To understand the role of judicial decisions in shaping ethical standards of legal practice.
- ii. To examine the ethical duties of lawyers towards the court and their clients in India.

Conceptual Framework of Legal Ethics

Meaning and Scope of Professional Ethics in Law

Professional ethics in law refer to the moral principles and standards that regulate the conduct of lawyers in their professional capacity. These ethics are designed to ensure that legal practice is carried out with honesty, integrity, competence, and respect for the justice system. In India, professional ethics are primarily governed by the *Advocates Act, 1961*, and the Bar Council of India Rules, which outline the duties of advocates towards the court, their clients, opposing parties, and society at large. The scope of legal ethics extends beyond technical compliance with rules; it includes moral responsibility, fairness in advocacy, confidentiality, avoidance of conflict of interest, and maintenance of professional dignity. Legal ethics thus serve a dual purpose: protecting clients' interests while safeguarding the credibility and integrity of the judicial process (Menon, 2014).

Ethical Foundations of Advocacy

The ethical foundations of advocacy are rooted in the idea that the law serves as a public service rather than merely a commercial profession. An advocate is expected to represent clients zealously, but only within the bounds of the law and the truth. Ethical advocacy requires candour towards the court, respect for judicial institutions, and a commitment to justice. Lawyers are officers of the court and play a crucial role in assisting judges to arrive at fair and informed decisions. Therefore, advocacy based on falsehood, suppression of material facts, or abuse of legal procedures is considered unethical, even if it benefits the client in the short term (Bar Council of India, 1975).

Legal ethics are also grounded in constitutional values such as the rule of law, equality before law, and access to justice. By adhering to ethical standards, lawyers contribute to public confidence in the legal system and ensure that justice is not compromised by individual or private interests. Thus, ethical advocacy represents a balance between client loyalty and the lawyer's higher duty to the court and society (Baxi, 2013).

Concept of Client Loyalty in Legal Practice

Meaning of the Client–Lawyer Relationship

Client loyalty is a core principle of legal practice, arising from the fiduciary nature of the client–lawyer relationship. This relationship is built on trust, confidence, and professional commitment, where the lawyer is expected to act in the best interests of the client within the framework of law. In India, this relationship is regulated by statutory and ethical norms that recognise the lawyer as a trusted representative who must safeguard the client's legal rights and interests. Loyalty does not imply blind obedience to client instructions; rather, it requires lawful, honest, and competent representation consistent with professional standards (Menon, 2014).

Confidentiality and Fiduciary Obligations

Confidentiality is a fundamental component of client loyalty. Clients must be able to communicate freely and fully with their lawyers without fear of disclosure. Indian legal ethics mandate that advocates preserve all information shared during the course of professional engagement, even after the termination of representation. This fiduciary obligation strengthens access to justice by encouraging truthful disclosure, enabling lawyers to provide effective advice and representation. However, confidentiality is not absolute and may be limited where disclosure is required by law or necessary to prevent abuse of the judicial process (Bar Council of India, 1975).

Zealous Representation and Its Limits

Zealous representation requires lawyers to defend their clients' interests with diligence, competence, and a commitment to excellence. Nonetheless, ethical limits restrain advocacy that involves misleading the court, suppressing material facts, or facilitating unlawful conduct. Indian courts have emphasised that loyalty to the client cannot override a lawyer's duty to uphold justice and legal integrity. Therefore, client loyalty operates within ethical boundaries, ensuring that advocacy remains principled and consistent with the rule of law (Baxi, 2013).

Conflict Between Duty to the Court and Client Loyalty

Situations of Ethical Dilemma

The conflict between a lawyer's duty to the court and loyalty to the client becomes most visible in situations involving ethical dilemmas. In the adversarial system, lawyers are expected to vigorously advance their clients' cases, yet they are also bound to assist the court in administering justice. Ethical dilemmas arise when client instructions conflict with legal truth, procedural fairness, or statutory obligations. For instance, a client may insist on adopting dilatory tactics, concealing relevant information, or pursuing frivolous litigation to gain a strategic

advantage. In such situations, the advocate must decide whether to follow the client's directions or adhere to their professional duties owed to the court and the justice system (Menon, 2014).

Misrepresentation, Suppression of Facts, and False Evidence

Misrepresentation and suppression of material facts directly undermine the integrity of judicial proceedings. Indian professional ethics explicitly prohibit advocates from knowingly making false statements or misleading the court. Presenting false evidence or encouraging a client to do so violates both legal ethics and the rule of law. The Supreme Court has consistently held that an advocate's primary duty is to the court, and that client loyalty does not justify distortion of facts or abuse of process. Suppression of material facts, even if advantageous to the client, is considered professional misconduct because it obstructs the court's ability to deliver justice fairly (Mahipal Singh Rana v. State of Uttar Pradesh, 2016).

Balancing Advocacy with Integrity of Justice

Balancing advocacy with the integrity of justice requires lawyers to exercise ethical judgment rather than mechanical obedience to client instructions. Zealous representation must operate within the boundaries of law, truth, and fairness. Lawyers are expected to advise clients against unethical or illegal strategies and, where necessary, refuse to act in a manner that compromises judicial integrity. This balance reinforces public confidence in the legal profession and ensures that advocacy remains a means of achieving justice rather than defeating it. Ultimately, ethical legal practice recognises that loyalty to the client is meaningful only when aligned with the lawyer's higher duty to the court and the rule of law (Baxi, 2013).

Legal and Ethical Framework Governing Lawyers in India

Advocates Act, 1961

The *Advocates Act, 1961*, forms the statutory backbone of the legal profession in India. Enacted to create a unified and regulated legal profession, the Act prescribes qualifications for enrolment, rights to practice, and mechanisms for disciplinary control. Its primary objective is to ensure that advocates maintain professional competence and ethical standards while discharging their duties to clients, courts, and society. The Act recognises advocates as integral participants in the administration of justice rather than mere private representatives.

A significant feature of the Act is the establishment of disciplinary jurisdiction over advocates. State Bar Councils are empowered to inquire into complaints of

professional misconduct, while appellate jurisdiction lies with the Bar Council of India and the Supreme Court. This hierarchical structure aims to promote accountability and preserve public confidence in the legal profession. By legally enforcing ethical behaviour, the Advocates Act links professional autonomy with responsibility, ensuring that advocacy remains aligned with the rule of law (Law Commission of India, 1958).

Bar Council of India Rules on Professional Conduct

The ethical duties of advocates are outlined in the Bar Council of India Rules, which are framed under the Advocates Act. These rules provide detailed guidance on professional standards and etiquette, covering duties towards courts, clients, opponents, and fellow advocates. They emphasise honesty, dignity, and fairness as core values of legal practice. An advocate is required to maintain respectful conduct in court, avoid making misleading statements, and refrain from abusing the judicial process.

The Rules also regulate the client-lawyer relationship by mandating confidentiality, avoiding conflicts of interest, and promoting transparent professional conduct. At the same time, they impose limits on client loyalty by prohibiting advocates from engaging in unlawful or unethical practices, even at the client's insistence. By codifying these norms, the Rules aim to strike a balance between zealous representation and ethical restraint, thereby reinforcing the notion that advocacy is a public trust (Bar Council of India, 1975).

Relevant Judicial Interpretations

Judicial interpretation has played a crucial role in clarifying and strengthening the ethical obligations of lawyers in India. Courts have repeatedly stressed that advocates are officers of the court and owe a primary duty to the administration of justice. In *R.K. Anand v. Registrar, Delhi High Court* (2009), the Supreme Court condemned attempts by advocates to influence witnesses and manipulate proceedings, holding such conduct to be professional misconduct that undermines judicial integrity.

Similarly, in *Mahipal Singh Rana v. State of Uttar Pradesh* (2016), the Court highlighted the declining ethical standards in legal practice and called for stricter enforcement of professional discipline. The judgment reaffirmed that the legal profession cannot function effectively without ethical advocates committed to truth and fairness. These judicial pronouncements reinforce statutory and regulatory frameworks by interpreting ethical duties in light of constitutional values such as the rule of law, fairness, and access to justice.

Integrated Ethical Framework

Together, the Advocates Act, the Bar Council Rules, and judicial interpretations constitute a comprehensive legal and ethical framework governing lawyers in India. This framework seeks to harmonise professional freedom with accountability, ensuring that lawyers serve both their clients and the justice system responsibly. Ethical compliance under this framework is essential for sustaining public trust and upholding the integrity of India's judicial process.

Landmark Supreme Court and High Court Decisions

Lawyers as officers of the court

The Supreme Court has repeatedly held that advocates are officers of the court and have a responsibility that transcends private client interests. In *P.N. Duda v. P. Shiv Shanker* (1988), the Court observed that advocates must maintain respect for judicial institutions and cannot claim absolute immunity for unethical conduct in the name of advocacy. This judgment clarified that professional freedom is subject to ethical restraint.

Misconduct and abuse of process

In *R.K. Anand v. Registrar, the Delhi High Court* (2009) dealt with an instance of attempts by senior advocates to influence witnesses. The Court categorically held that such conduct strikes at the root of the justice delivery system and constitutes serious professional misconduct. Client interest was expressly rejected as a justification for unethical behaviour (R.K. Anand, 2009).

Strengthening disciplinary control

In *Mahipal Singh Rana v. State of Uttar Pradesh* (2016), the Supreme Court expressed concern over declining ethical standards in the legal profession. It emphasised the need for effective disciplinary mechanisms and reaffirmed that advocates must uphold truth, fairness, and professional integrity even under pressure from clients.

Evolving Standards of Professional Conduct

Shift from client-centric to justice-centric ethics

Judicial decisions reflect a gradual shift from viewing advocacy as purely client-centric to recognising it as justice-centric. Courts have clarified that zealous representation does not permit the suppression of facts or the presentation of misleading arguments, thereby redefining ethical advocacy in constitutional terms (Sarkar, 2016).

Emphasis on candour and transparency

Courts increasingly stress the importance of candour towards the judiciary as a core ethical duty. Advocates are expected to disclose relevant legal positions, including adverse precedents, to help courts make informed

decisions. This evolving standard promotes fairness and informed adjudication.

Ethics as a constitutional value

Recent judicial trends have linked professional ethics with constitutional principles, such as the rule of law and access to justice. Ethical conduct is no longer viewed as a mere professional obligation, but as an essential requirement for maintaining public confidence in the legal system (Law Commission of India, 2017).

Comparative Perspectives

Position in the UK and the USA

In the **United Kingdom**, legal ethics place strong emphasis on a lawyer's overriding duty to the court. Within the professional framework governing barristers and solicitors, advocates are required to act with independence, honesty, and candour, even when such duties conflict with their clients' interests. Courts in the UK have consistently held that misleading the court or suppressing material facts amounts to serious professional misconduct. The ethical model reflects the view that lawyers are integral to the justice system and must assist courts in reaching correct decisions, rather than merely advancing partisan outcomes (Supreme Court of the United Kingdom, 2013).

In the **United States**, legal ethics are largely shaped by the Model Rules of Professional Conduct, which were framed by the American Bar Association. These rules emphasise client loyalty, confidentiality, and zealous representation, but they also impose clear limits. Lawyers are prohibited from knowingly presenting false evidence, making false statements to courts, or assisting clients in fraudulent conduct. The American approach recognises strong client advocacy, yet it firmly subordinates such advocacy to duties of honesty and fairness towards tribunals, thereby preserving the integrity of judicial proceedings (ABA, 1983).

Lessons for the Indian Legal System

Comparative experience from the UK and the USA highlights the importance of clear ethical boundaries and effective enforcement mechanisms. Both systems demonstrate that client loyalty must operate within strict ethical limits defined by the lawyer's duty to the court. For India, these jurisdictions offer lessons in strengthening disciplinary procedures, enhancing ethical training, and promoting a culture of candour in advocacy. Adopting clearer guidance on ethical dilemmas and ensuring consistent enforcement can help Indian legal practice strike a better balance between zealous representation and the overarching goal of justice, thereby reinforcing public confidence in the legal system.

III. CHALLENGES IN ETHICAL COMPLIANCE

Adversarial System Pressures

- i. *Win-centric advocacy culture*: The adversarial model often rewards tactical success over ethical restraint, encouraging lawyers to prioritise outcomes rather than fairness.
- ii. *Client-driven litigation strategies*: Clients may demand aggressive positions, procedural delays, or selective disclosure, placing advocates under pressure to stretch ethical boundaries.
- iii. *Competitive courtroom environment*: Intense competition among lawyers can incentivise overstatement of facts or law to outshine opposing counsel.
- iv. *Time constraints and case overload*: Heavy dockets reduce preparation time, increasing the risk of inadvertent ethical lapses such as inadequate disclosure or cursory verification of facts.
- v. *Normalisation of sharp practices*: Repeated exposure to borderline conduct can gradually desensitise practitioners, making unethical behaviour appear routine rather than exceptional.

Commercialisation of Legal Practice

- i. *Market-driven incentives*: Fee structures tied to results or volume can push lawyers toward expedient tactics that conflict with ethical standards.
- ii. *Client retention pressures*: Fear of losing clients may deter advocates from refusing unethical instructions or advising against improper strategies.
- iii. *Advertising and branding race*: Competitive marketing can blur professional boundaries, risking misleading claims and dilution of professional dignity.
- iv. *Law firm hierarchies*: Junior lawyers may feel compelled to follow seniors' directives even when ethical concerns arise, limiting independent judgment.
- v. *Billing pressures*: Emphasis on billable hours can encourage unnecessary proceedings or prolong litigation, undermining the duty to efficient justice.

Weak Disciplinary Enforcement

- i. *Delayed grievance redressal*: Prolonged disciplinary proceedings reduce deterrence and weaken accountability.
- ii. *Inconsistent sanctions*: Variability in penalties for similar misconduct undermines the predictability and credibility of enforcement.
- iii. *Limited investigative capacity*: Resource constraints hinder thorough fact-finding and timely resolution of complaints.
- iv. *Low reporting rates*: Clients and peers may hesitate to report misconduct due to fear of retaliation or scepticism about outcomes.
- v. *Insufficient ethics training*: Lack of continuous professional development on ethics leaves gaps in awareness and compliance.
- vi. *Perception of impunity*: When sanctions are rare or delayed, unethical conduct may be viewed as low-risk.

Need for Harmonising Court Duty and Client Loyalty

Balancing an advocate's obligation to the court with loyalty to the client is essential for preserving the credibility of the legal system. Effective harmonisation ensures that advocacy advances justice without compromising ethical integrity.

Ethical Balancing Principles

- i. *Primacy of legality*: Client instructions must always be filtered through the law; unlawful or deceptive strategies should be declined at the outset.
- ii. *Candour to the court*: Truthful presentation of facts and law safeguards judicial decision-making and prevents miscarriage of justice.
- iii. *Informed client counselling*: Lawyers should clearly explain ethical limits to clients and propose lawful alternatives to achieve objectives.
- iv. *Proportional advocacy*: Arguments and tactics should be proportionate to the dispute, avoiding obstructionist or dilatory practices.
- v. *Conflict recognition and management*: Early identification of conflicts between client goals and ethical duties allows timely corrective action, including withdrawal where necessary.
- vi. *Accountability and documentation*: Maintaining records of advice and decisions supports transparency and ethical defensibility.
- vii. *Respect for process*: Upholding procedural fairness reinforces trust in outcomes and reduces incentives for sharp practices.

- viii. *Professional independence*: Advocates must exercise independent judgment, resisting undue pressure from clients or other stakeholders.

Role of Professional Training and Continuing Legal Education

- i. *Ethics-first induction*: Early-career training should embed ethical reasoning as a core professional skill, not an afterthought.
- ii. *Scenario-based learning*: Simulations of ethical dilemmas help practitioners apply principles in realistic contexts.
- iii. *Updates on evolving standards*: Regular programs should track changes in rules, case law, and best practices affecting professional conduct.
- iv. *Mentorship and peer learning*: Structured mentoring fosters ethical judgment through experience-sharing and guidance.
- v. *Interdisciplinary exposure*: Insights from psychology, negotiation, and compliance improve decision-making under pressure.
- vi. *Assessment and certification*: Periodic evaluation of ethical competence reinforces accountability and learning outcomes.
- vii. *Accessible resources*: Practical toolkits and advisory helplines support real-time ethical decision-making.
- viii. *Leadership commitment*: Senior practitioners and institutions should model ethical conduct, shaping professional culture.

IV. WAY FORWARD AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Strengthening Ethical Regulation

A robust ethical framework is essential to ensure that legal practice remains aligned with the ideals of justice and fairness. Ethical regulation should be strengthened through clearer professional standards, timely disciplinary procedures, and proportionate sanctions for misconduct. Rules governing professional conduct must be periodically reviewed to address emerging challenges such as misuse of procedural delays, unethical client counselling, and commercial pressures. Swift and transparent enforcement of ethical norms can act as an effective deterrent and reinforce the credibility of the legal profession. Strengthening regulation also requires simplifying complaint mechanisms so that grievances against professional misconduct are addressed efficiently and fairly.

Role of Bar Councils and Judiciary

Bar Councils play a central role in regulating professional conduct and safeguarding ethical standards. They must exercise disciplinary powers proactively, ensure consistency in decision-making, and reduce delays in resolving complaints. Regular monitoring of professional behaviour and publication of disciplinary outcomes can enhance accountability. The judiciary, on the other hand, shapes ethical conduct through judicial interpretation and courtroom oversight. Courts should continue to discourage unethical practices, such as the suppression of facts or abuse of process, and clearly articulate ethical expectations through their judgments. Judicial guidance, combined with effective regulatory action by Bar Councils, can create a balanced system of ethical governance.

Enhancing Ethical Awareness Among Lawyers

Long-term ethical compliance depends on awareness and professional culture. Ethical training should be integrated into legal education and reinforced through continuing legal education programs. Workshops, seminars, and case-based discussions on ethical dilemmas can help lawyers develop practical judgment. Senior advocates and law firms should also promote ethical leadership and mentorship. By fostering a culture where ethical conduct is valued as professional strength rather than limitation, the legal system can better harmonise client advocacy with duties to the court and society.

V. CONCLUSION

The relationship between a lawyer's duty to the court and loyalty to the client lies at the heart of ethical legal practice in India. This study has demonstrated that while client loyalty is crucial for effective representation, it is not absolute and must be balanced within the boundaries of the law, truth, and fairness. Statutory provisions under the Advocates Act, professional conduct rules framed by the Bar Council of India, and consistent judicial interpretation collectively emphasise that advocates are officers of the court with a paramount obligation to the administration of justice. The study further highlights how pressures of the adversarial system, increasing commercialisation, and weak disciplinary enforcement contribute to ethical conflicts in daily legal practice. Comparative perspectives from other jurisdictions underline that prioritising judicial integrity strengthens public confidence without undermining client rights. The findings also demonstrate that ethical compliance cannot rely solely on regulation; it requires conscious balancing by advocates, supported by professional training and continuous ethical education.

Ultimately, harmonising court duty and client loyalty is essential for preserving the credibility of the legal profession. A principled commitment to ethical advocacy, reinforced by effective regulation and institutional support, ensures that legal practice remains a vital instrument of justice rather than a mere contest of interests.

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